PHONETIC AND PHONOLOGICAL PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY OMANI STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

Dr. HAZIM HAKKUSH MUARICH AL- DILAIMY (INSTRUCTOR)

UNIVERSITY OF ANBAR
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION FOR HUMANITIES
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

Abstract

Omani students of English encounter some Phonetic and Phonological problems reflected in the perception, identification and production of various English speech sounds. Most of these problems are related to the relatively complicated orthographic system of English taught to Omani students at earlier stages of English language learning and to the inconsistent relationship between spelling and pronunciation of English and the differences between the sound system of Arabic and English. They often result in some pronunciation challenges for Omani students of English(hence OSE) with respect to consonants, consonant clusters, vowels, diphthongs and words used in connected speech. Omani regional differences also pose a serious pronunciation difficulty represented by first language interference in the target language. This paper tries to account for the areas of difficulty and provide some suggestions and recommendations that could overcome the pronunciation problems in the oral performance of Omani students of English.

المستخلص

يواجه الطلبة العمانيون دارسوا اللغة الانجليزية بعض المشاكل الصوتية تتمثل في تحديد وادراك ونطق اصوات اللغة الانجليزية المختلفة. وتكمن صعوبة نطق معظم تلك الاصوات في نظام الكتابة المعقد للغة الانجليزية الذي يدرسه الطلبة العمانيون في مراحل دراسية مبكرة من دراستهم وكذالك في العلاقة غير المتوازنة في اللغة الانجليزية بين نظام الاملاء والتلفظ. اضافة الى الاختلافات في الانظمة الصوتية للغتين الانجليزية والعربية. وقد مثلت تلك الاختلافات تحديات للطلبة العمانين دارسي اللغة الانجليزية في جوانب عديدة تمثلت في الاصوات الساكنة واصوات العلة والكلمات الداخلة في الكلام المتصل. وقد مثلت الاختلافات اللغوية للاقاليم العمانية مشاكل حقيقية في التلفظ وخاصة في مجال تاثيرات اللغة الام عل اللغة الثانية. تهدف هذه الدراسة الباستكشاف مواضع الصعوبة وتقديم بعض التوصيات والمقترحات للتغلب على مشاكل النطق في الكلام المسموع للطلبة العمانين دارسي اللغة الانجليزية.

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1. Introduction

Learning English pronunciation is very important for all people studying English as a foreign language. Good pronunciation makes a learner's English understandable and communication between speakers and listeners successful. During the researcher's teaching experience in Oman which lasted for more than ten years, many problems which obviously hinder the learning process in terms of proficiency in the oral and auditory skills of English as a second language have been noticed. English is non-phonetic language as there is no direct correspondence between spelling and the actual sounds produced and perceived by learners.

Omani students always face problems with the pronunciation of English both with individual words, words in context and utterances that cross the boundaries of single words ,i.e., phrases and sentences. In addition, teachers of English at the primary and secondary schools lack efficiency and mastery of English pronunciation that may make them not good models for their students. Thus, some of the areas of difficulty that result in students' failure to produce an optimal pronunciation date back to their previous inaccurate pronunciation they have got from their teachers. Teachers are either unaware of the students' mispronunciation or they simply concentrate on comprehension and speech perception more than teaching students speech sounds and how to organize them in well defined sound patterns. The second major problem for OSE is related to mother tongue interference . Some OSE try to apply the phonemic system and constraints of consonant and vowel production of Omani Arabic variety. Thus a wide range of mispronounced English sounds are articulated. The words that are frequently mispronounced by OSE include: comb, education, advertisement, rough, colonel, bridge, grammar, etc. The data of this study have been collected from the students' transcription exam sheets, actual conversations in the classroom, listening to students presentations, workshops and

from the lessons delivered by student teachers during the school based and college based practicum experience in the Sultanate of Oman for the academic year 2010-2011.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the major phonetic problems hindering the production of accurate English pronunciation. It also tries to give some suggestions for learners and syllabus designers that could help to improve pronunciation of OSE.

1.2 The Influence of Spelling on Pronunciation

Omani learners of English, like most of the Arab learners, due to the differences of the orthographic representation of Arabic and English, may encounter problems in pronouncing words from written texts. This problem is also acute for the OSE as there is no harmony between English spelling and pronunciation since there is no one- to one correspondence between spelling and pronunciation i.e. the written form of words are different from the way words are pronounced. This arbitrary relation may lead many Omani learners to commit pronunciation mistakes especially with words that have the same spelling but different phonemic representation. O'Grady(1997: 315).

It is observed that most of the students are not aware of the pronunciation rules which determine the pronunciation of individual words having the phoneme /r/ in certain positions. They pronounce it wherever it occurs in a word:

Word	British	Omani Pronunciation
Teacher	/ti:tΣ≅/	/ti:tΣ≅r/
Bearer	/be≅r≅/	/bi:r≅r/
Reader	/ri:d≅/	ri:d≅r/
Sailor	/seIl≅/	/s3:l≅r/

Grammar	/gr{m≅/	/gremer/,/dZremer/, / dZr{mer/

Words that have combinations of consonants and give just one phoneme may be also problematic to some Omani students as in the following examples:

Word	British English	Omani Pronunciation
Shepherded	/Σep≅d/	/Σef≅rd/
Rough	/rςf/	/rO:g/
Neighbour	/neIb≅	/neIb≅r/
Plough	/plaY/	/plO:f/

Students may also experience pronunciation challenges with some English letters that are written but not pronounced. They are frequently pronounced by some incompetent students.

Word	British English	Omani Pronunciation
Doubt	/daYt/	/daYbIt/
Psychology	/saIkΘlΘdZI/	/bIsaIkΘlΘdZI/ /bIsaIkΘlΘgI/,
Comb	/k≅Ym/	kO:mb/
Sign	/saIn/	/sIgIn/
Lamb	/l{m/	/l{mb/
Half	/hA:f/	/h{lf/
Knot	/nΘt/	/knΘt/
Walked	wO:kt	/wO:kId/

It is observed that the pronunciation of the letter (c) is also confusing to many students as they are unaware of the phonetic rules which determine the choice of the two phonemes /k/ and /t/ respectively.

Word	British English	Omani Pronunciation
Cement	/sIment/	/IsmInt/, /kImInt/
Stomach	/stçm≅k/	/stO:m≅tΣ/, /stO:m≅Σ/,
Ache	/eIk/	/etΣ/, /3:tΣ/, /3:k/
Archaic	/A:keIIk/	/A:rtΣeIIk/, /A:rΣeIIs/
Cycle	/saIkl/	/s3:kIl/,/s3:sIl/
Licence	/laIs≅ns/	/l3:sIn/,/l3:kIn/

The problem of spelling- pronunciation relation is highlighted by Collins and Mees(2008:106-107) as posing difficulties to both English native speakers and non-native speakers alike; the problem is quite overt for native speakers in that they are aware of the pronunciation of words, however, they may have some problems with the spelling of these words. This is so because they rarely make mistakes with the pronunciation of the words. For non native speakers, on the other hand, the problem is more complicated since they usually have little trouble with the spelling of words, but with how the words are pronounced. Kharma and Hajjaj(1989: 14) state " The spelling of Arabic is overwhelmingly regular. In contrast, the spelling of English is seemingly very irregular. Moreover, to the learner, written English is not always a reliable guide to Pronunciation "

1.3 English Consonants vs. Omani Consonants

Due to the diversity of regional dialects in Oman, it has been observed that that each of these dialects undergoes differences in pronunciation that is clearly reflected in the articulation of English speech sounds. The pronunciation of both consonants and vowels varies from one region to another across the country. The Omani Arabic phoneme /dZ/, for example has four distinct allophones namely: / dZ/, /Z/, /g/ and /j/ respectively. All these different variants are found in a free variation environment in Omani Arabic. What is amazing is that there is no rule that governs the occurrence of either of these forms in Omani Arabic. This allophonic variation was observed during the researcher's teaching experience in Oman. In addition Omani members of the teaching staff do not bother about the students' pronunciation whether the text is read out in English or Arabic. What looks encouraging for Omani students is that many native speakers who are teaching English do not pay much attention to students who commit pronunciation mistakes related to the English counterpart / dZ/ because the teachers attention is mainly devoted to students' comprehension rather than attaining a full mastery over pronunciation. Aitchison(2005:112) believes that phonological variations can be traced in casual speech of people belonging to different social environments. She states :

> Speakers vary not only their vocabulary and syntax, but also the sound structure. Phonological variation, both between speakers and within a single speaker, is immensely important as a reflection of various social factors. Speakers of a language alter their phonology to suit a particular situation, often without realizing it for example someone

When two or more allophones occur in the same position of a word without any change in meaning, they are said to be variants of the same phoneme. Crystal(2007:77) believes that the differences between one individual speaker and

another are mainly related to differences of the various organs of speech. The focus should be made in order to account for the sounds that are important in communicating meaning. In his reference to the variations of sound, he states " No two speakers have automatically identical vocal tracts, and thus no one pronounces sounds in exactly the same way as anyone else." The choice of either allophones in Omani Arabic depends on many factors in a communicative situation. These factors include regional dialects, social class distinctions, idiolects
and the students' lack of knowledge about the nature of English allophonic variations according to different phonetic contexts. OSE struggle to pronounce some problematic English consonants by producing Omani consonants near in pronunciation to the English counterparts. But their efforts are always subject to mispronunciation in that they produce different phonemes which result in meaning differences. As a result, much harm happens to the intelligibility of speakers and listeners resulting in a failure of mutual understanding between them. The choice for OSE between allophonic consonants is always arbitrary for both the consonants which have more than one allophone in Omani Arabic and the consonants which do not have an English counterparts as in the following table:

English consonant	Omani Pronunciation
/tΣ/	/ Σ/,
/γ/	/dZ/
/dZ/	/γ/
/p/	/b/
/v/	/f/
/N/	/Ng/

Due to the relatively long experience of teaching phonetics and phonology at Omani Colleges of Education(later were converted into Colleges of Applied Sciences), it is quite common for the researcher to relate individual students to their relevant regions in Oman. Thus, a lot of effort has been done to guide students to overcome some of their pronunciation problems. The following are words frequently mispronounced by OSE.

Word	British English	Omani Pronunciation
Chip	/tΣIp/	/ΣIp/ ,/ ΣIb/
Language	/l{NwidZ/	/l{ngwig/, /l{ngwiZ/
Games	/geImz/	/g3:mz
Person	/p3:sn/	/p3:rsOn/, /p3:rsIn/,
John	/dZOn	/gO:n/, /ZO:n/
Van	/v{n/	/f{n/
sing	/sIN/	/sIng/
Rich	/rItΣ/	/rIΣ/
Peak	/pi:k/	/bi:k/
Letter	/let≅/	/lIt≅r/
people	/pi:pl/	/pi:pYl/
First	/f3:st/	/fIrIst/
Bear	/be≅/	/bi:r/
Lion	/laI≅n/	/lIjΘn
Page	/peIdZ/	/p3:g/, //p3:Z/
Next	/nekst/	/nekIst/

Texts	/tekst/	tekIst
Wool	/wYl/	/wu:l/
Wood	/wYd/	/wu:d/
Complete	/k≅mpli:t/	/kΘmpIli:t/
Lamb	/l{m/	/l{mb/
Stopped	/stΘpt/	/stΘpId/
Sentence	/sent≅ns/	/sIntens/
Against	/egenst/	/egenIst/, /edZenIst/
Vowel	/vaY≅l/	/vaYIl/

1.4 English Vowels and Diphthongs vs. Omani Vowels and Diphthongs

Vowels are sounds produced with a free passage of air in the vocal tract. British English vowels are classified into two kinds: pure vowels and diphthongs. Sharma(2005: 244) looks at the differences between consonants and vowels in terms of the air stream which is impeded at certain points in the vocal tract in the production of consonants, whereas with vowels the air stream is not interrupted by any articulator in the vocal tract. Ladefoged(2006:85) believes that the boundaries between on vowel and another are not clear sometimes. Thus, speakers may use an intermediate pronunciation between vowels like /A:/ and /{/ to overcome differences of pronunciation as seen in fan/ f{n/ and father /fA:Δ≅/ respectively. As compared to Arabic, the number of vowels in English is bigger. In Arabic, there are just six vowels and two diphthongs. In English, there are twelve vowels, eight diphthongs and five triphthongs(a combination of vowels that include three vowels). A pure vowel does not glide to another vowel, whereas a diphthong is a combination of two vowel sounds one of them. is long and the other one is short. The long vowel in the

combination glides towards the short element(O'Coner,2003; Roach, 2009). There are nine diphthongs in Received Pronunciation. Which exhibit changes in vowel quality depending on tongue movement and the glide to another vowel. O'Grady et. al(1996:36) mention two main classes of diphthong: centring diphthongs and closing diphthongs . Vowels and diphthongs, unlike consonants, are not easy to produce. O'Conner(2003:79) makes a suggestion for non- native speakers to do a lot of listening and imitating, training and practice in order to have a mastery of these sounds. It has been observed that vowels, diphthongs and other sequences of vowels are the most problematic sounds to OSE. This is due to the differences between the vowel systems in English and Omani Arabic reflected in English as a kind of first language interference. Kharma and Hajjaj(1989:14) state:

> Arab learners of English face the problem not only in recognizing certain sounds but also of producing them. A more serious problem, however, in that it can lead to misunderstanding, is that of confusing these sounds. Because of the

The table below shows how different individual words are pronounced in English and by OSE.

Word	British English	Omani Pronunciation
Ten	/ten/	/tIn/
Heart	/hA:t/	/h3:rt/
Heard	/h3:d/	/h3:rd/
Perhaps	/p≅h{ps/	/perh{bs/,/perh{ps/
Paper	/peIp≅/	/p3:per/
Measure	/meZ≅/	/medZer/, /meger/,/meZer/

Snow	/sn≅Y/	/sno:/
Late	/leIt/	/l3:t/
Year	jI≅/	/ji:r/
Dear	/dI≅/	/di:r/
Tower	/tau≅/	/tu:r
Cure	/kjY≅/	/kju:r/
Bare	/be≅/	/b3:r/
Drawing	/drO:IN/	/drawIng/

1.5 Vowel Quality

The term duration is a phonetic property which refers to the span of time needed for the actual production of a particular vowel sound. Thus, the vowel sound in feed / fi:d/ is a long pure vowel but it may be realized as a short vowel depending on speakers and their ability to produce it with a different vowel quality. Ladefoged(ibid:93) mentions that each language or accent undergoes some vowel differences or contrasts. The differences in the additional vowels concerned are related to differences in distribution. All these differences are viewed by phoneticians in terms of vowel quality. Ladefoged(ibid) states:

> Try to compare your accent of English with another accent and say which of the vowel differences are best described as differences in the system of vowels, which are differences of distribution, and which involve just differences in vowel quality. Often all three of these factors- systemic differences, distributional

The choice between producing a short or long vowel could be problematic and confusing to OSE and often leads to in accuracy of vowel production. Length of the vowel, however, is another problematic area to non- native students, and it is usually treated within the framework of phonology. It refers to the length of time for the vowel production as it is perceived by the listener. Inability of students to master

both length and duration of the vowel production will result in meaning differences. Skandera and Burleigh(2005:11).

Word	British English	Omani Pronunciation
Wood	/wYd/	/wu:d/
Wooed	/wu:d/	/wu:d/
Clerk	/klA:k/	/kl3:k/
Measure	/meZ≅/	/medZer/, /meger/
Coup	/ku:p/	/kYb/
Word	/w3:d/	/wO:rd/

1.6 <u>Sequences of Consonant Clusters</u>

Consonant sequences in English are combinations of consonant sounds in succession with no vowel in between. The number of consonant clusters in English exceeds five. In Arabic , however, the sequence of consonants does not have more than two. OSE, like Arab students in general, in their attempt to pronounce these sequences, often insert a sound breaker, usually a vowel. Kharma and Hajjaj (ibid:17) states that this phenomenon is problematic for Arab learners of English, and " very often they follow Arabic patterns of speech as an intrusive vowel which acts as a cluster breaker".

Word	British English	Omani Pronunciation
Struggle	/strςgl/	/sItrςgIl/
Spring	/sprIN/	/sIprIng/
Street	/stri:t/	/sItri:t/
Expects	/Ikspekt/	/IkIspekIt/
Manuscripts	/m{njYskrpt/	/m{njYsIkrpIt
Abstract	/{bstr{kt/	/{bsItr{kt/

1.7 Syllabic Consonants

A syllabic consonant is the consonant which forms the centre of the syllable that is usually represented by a vowel. Gimson (1985: 58) refers to syllabic consonants as sounds that" fulfil a syllabic function without the presence of a vowel ".The syllabic feature can be used with(l, t, m ,n , r, N /. It can take the place of the vowel. It appears as a dot just below the syllabic sound. Syllabic consonants are also problematic to OSE as there is a tendency by students to insert a vowel in this position.

1.8 Assimilation

The term refers to sounds in context, one sound becomes another sound either under the influence of a neighbouring sound or as a result of modifications of place of articulation or manner of articulation. This phenomenon is universal, and it occurs within the word or in utterances bigger than the word in rapid speech. Assimilation according to Small(2005:171) is used to refer to both

allophonic changes brought about by phonetic environment". It has also been stated by Small(ibid) that most of the assimilations related to phonetic environment take place as a result of modifications of the place of articulation of some particular phonemes. Students should not worry about memorizing assimilated forms. It is recommended that they know the rules which determine the assimilated from non assimilated utterances in certain contexts.

1.9 Recommendations and Suggestions

The study shows that there is an urgent need to find solutions that could help OSE and Arab students facing similar phonetic and phonological problems. These suggestion include:

1. Students should be aware of the differences between the sound system in English and Omani Arabic and possible areas that are subject to first language interference .

2. Extensive practice and a lot of exercises to be given for students on problematic English sounds.

3. Native speakers teaching OSE should be asked to devote much of

their attention to concentrate on pronunciation problems facing the students and not on the issue of comprehension only.

4. Primary and secondary school teachers of English must also focus on problematic sounds and give their students a lot of listening, repetition drills and practice.

5. Holding workshops and seminars for primary and secondary school

teachers of English that teach them how to handle this important issue.

6. Textbook and syllabus designers should introduce a lot of exercises about the problematic sounds for OSE.

7. A lot of practice should be given for Students about the problems related to voicing distinctions. e.g., (pin, bin; peak ,beak; pray, bray). Also consonant clusters, syllabic consonants and sounds in connected speech.

8. Encouraging students to imitate native speakers, CDs, tape-recordings, TV, etc.

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